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HAMLET'S THIRD SOLILOQUY

BY TUCKER BROOKE

The seven great soliloquies of Hamlet may be divided into two groups. Three of them—the first (“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,” etc., I.ii.129 ff.), the fourth (“To be or not to be,” III.i.56 ff.), and the sixth (“Now might I do it pat,” etc., III.iii. 73 ff.)—show the hero inert and over-reflective, inclined to toy with the idea of suicide, to overlook the responsibilities of life, and speculate in an unhealthy manner on existence beyond the grave. Indeed, the fourth soliloquy—the famous “To be or not to be”—marks the lowest intellectual level reached by Hamlet. The complete selfishness of the argument, the refusal to recognize any duty to live for the sake of his mission, and the astonishing “bestial oblivion” evidenced by the allusion to

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns

on the tongue of one who has recently spoken with his own father's ghost—these all shock the attentive reader and show the speaker's intelligence at its nadir. Such, I think, was clearly Shakespeare's intention; and despite the rhetorical brilliance of the lines when taken absolutely, the critic may well be pardoned a cynical amusement at the fact that just this speech and Polonius's fatuous advice to his son—advice very worthy of Lord Chesterfield—should be enshrined in the memory of the general public as particular gems of Shakespearian wisdom.

The three soliloquies just mentioned are all the product of a relatively quiescent frame of mind. The first is uttered before Hamlet has learned of his father's murder; the fourth is spoken in the quiet of the morning (?) before the play; while in the sixth, though the presence of Claudius disturbs Hamlet's conscience, the motionless and suppliant posture of the King evidently acts as a check on the speaker's emotions.

In the four other soliloquies we see Hamlet in far more normal and admirable moods, and each of these soliloquies is produced by a state of special excitement. The second immediately follows the exit of the Ghost, the third is inspired by the Player's moving declamation, the fifth follows the success of the “Mousetrap,” and the seventh is evoked by the impressive sight of Fortinbras and his army. This

last soliloquy is certainly the finest in the play, and it gives ground for the idea that Hamlet's tragedy arises not from the excessive postponement but from the too early development of the crisis. The fine words about the purposes of "god-like reason," the clear sense of personal power, the sympathetic appreciation of Fortinbras's spirit, coupled with the discriminating realization of what it is "Rightly to be great," evidence that "slight thinning of the dark cloud of melancholy," which Professor Bradley thinks he observes in the following (fifth) act.

Now this last soliloquy is a close and doubtless intentional counterpart of the third, which I wish more particularly to discuss. Both speeches mark a psychological progress from intense self-dissatisfaction and even self-abuse ("How all occasions do inform against me!"—"O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"), through elaborate self-analysis, to self-confidence; and each ends with an almost triumphant declaration of the speaker's practical resolution:—

O, from this time forth
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

The play's the thing,
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

In these two speeches, which represent a wider intellectual range than any other in the play, is to be found the surest key to Hamlet's mental difficulty; and the clue is most distinct in the earlier, which is the longer—indeed much the longest of all the soliloquies.

In the third soliloquy I find confirmation of Professor Bradley's theory of Hamlet's melancholy, of which that most careful critic seems inobservant. Indeed, it is strange to find that Professor Bradley and his most determined opponent, Mr. W. F. Trench, who thinks Hamlet definitely mad, occupy the same ground in their interpretation of the vastly important conclusion of the third soliloquy, where Hamlet resolves to test the King's guilt by means of the "Mousetrap."

Professor Bradley writes (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 131):—"Nothing, surely, can be clearer than the meaning of this famous soliloquy. (*Sic!*) The doubt which appears at its close, instead of being the natural conclusion of the preceding thoughts, is totally inconsistent with them. For Hamlet's self-reproaches, his curses on his enemy, and his perplexity about his own inaction, one and all imply his faith in the identity and truthfulness of the Ghost. *Evidently this sudden doubt, of which there has not been the slightest*

trace before, is no genuine doubt; it is an unconscious fiction, an excuse for his delay—and for its continuance."

Mr. Trench's explanation is essentially the same (*Shakespeare's Hamlet*, p. 126):—

"The doubt upon this point (i.e. the King's guilt) is a supposititious doubt invented to excuse the substitution of another sort of action for the action that is required."

Now in the case of that other artist in soliloquies, Iago, we are accustomed to discount the probability of conscious or unconscious insincerity; but Hamlet is a very different character, and Shakespeare's dramatic problem is in his case altogether different. Iago's various insincerities mutually confute and explain one another and are explained by his many actions; but Hamlet does not thus interpret his words by the constant comment of action, and I can find no other instance in which his words seem intended to be taken at less than their full face value.

The idea, then, that Shakespeare ventured upon the hazardous expedient of requiring his auditors to understand the eloquent conclusion of this most elaborate soliloquy in a Pickwickian sense, as "no genuine doubt" or as "supposititious," would seem allowable only as a last resort after failure to discover any logical reason for the words. I cannot at all agree with Professor Bradley's assumption that the doubt about the King's guilt, "instead of being the natural conclusion of the preceding thoughts, is totally inconsistent with them." Let us consider the third soliloquy as a whole and in connection with the feelings which prompted it.

The speech is Hamlet's reaction on the Player's declamation concerning the death of Priam. In introducing that declamation, Shakespeare seems to have been actuated by three motives, of which the first two have been noted by the critics. I do not remember, however, to have seen any mention of the third and most important. Certainly, it is ignored by Professor Bradley and Mr. Trench, whose difficulties regarding the following soliloquy can thus, I think, be accounted for.

The dramatic purposes of the "rugged Pyrrhus" declamation appear to be:—

1. It continues the rather good-natured protest concerning the "little eyases" of the Queen's Chapel by an obvious, though not very uncomplimentary parody of the turgid lines on the death of Priam in their play of *Dido* (by Marlowe and Nashe).

2. The Pyrrhus-Priam-Hecuba story furnishes a kind of parallel to the Hamlet-Claudius-Gertrude story. As Mr. Trench well puts it: "Around the slaying of a king all Hamlet's thoughts ever revolve; so in this half-dramatized epic the most attractive passage of all is that about the death of Priam." (p. 104)

These are rather trivial and incidental purposes. By themselves they would hardly justify the intrusion of some seventy lines of melodramatic bombast, irrelevant to the actual story of Hamlet.

3. There is, however, an aspect in which the declamation has very decided relevance to Hamlet's case. Let us assume with Mr. Bradley that Shakespeare understands Hamlet to be suffering from melancholic depression, and then ask what effect upon his hero the dramatist would look for from such an exciting bit of dramatic entertainment. Clearly, a salutary effect. We all know how wonderfully fits of "blues" caused by disappointment or excessive introspection are alleviated by a play, particularly a wild farce or lurid melodrama. The mists of self-absorption are cleared from our brains; we see our own troubles in proper focus and perspective.

So it is with Hamlet. It is no accident, I think, that the announcement of the players' coming finds him in the lowest spirits he has shown, complaining of his "bad dreams," confessing that "Denmark's a prison" and that man delights not him; no, nor woman neither. He brightens up at once when the actors are announced and becomes more normal and gayer in their presence. He thirsts for dramatic distraction. "We'll e'en to 't like French falconers," he cries; "we'll have a speech straight. . . . Come, a passionate speech." Perhaps the bad dramatic taste for which he is blamed in his praise of "Æneas's tale to Dido" is to be ascribed to his momentary craving for strong excitement. He listens avidly to the declamation and snubs Polonius savagely for finding it too long. When the entertainment is over and Hamlet is left alone, the Aristotelian purgation by tragic pity and terror has been effected. He is in the position of a mountain climber long held inactive by befogging mist, when suddenly the cloud is dispelled and instantaneously he sees his course before him.

The great soliloquy which follows has two parts, quite logically connected. In the first part, as the mists are blown from his brain, Hamlet feels a natural wonder and disgust that he has been inactive so long. The cause of delay, being entirely psychological, is quite inconceivable when it is momentarily removed. He contrasts him-

self with the actor and proposes three hypothetical reasons for his failure to perform the duty of vengeance: (1) he is "a dull and muddy-mettled rascal"; (2) he is a coward; (3) he is an ass that unpacks his heart with words. At this point he contemptuously drops the vain search for causes, and like the keen and efficient thinker he naturally is, turns his attention to the matter before him:

Fie upon't! foh! About, my brain!

In the second part of the soliloquy, Hamlet looks to the future and apprehends no more difficulty than when the vengeance was first asked of him. He sees nothing to stop him. However, weeks have passed—perhaps two months—since he heard the Ghost's words, and the impression of the interview is inevitably less vivid than it was. The facts of the revelation are perfectly clear, but naturally—how could it be otherwise?—he no longer feels that ardent conviction of the trustworthiness of his supernatural visitant which had enabled him to cry out to Horatio and Marcellus on the night of the meeting:

Touching this vision here,
It is an *honest* ghost, that let me tell you.

Hamlet now realizes what Horatio and Marcellus then realized—that what the people of Shakespeare's time generally understood—that there are ghosts honest and ghosts dishonest. In the actual presence of the spirit he had no doubts, but could he conscientiously trust that feeling now? There is no effort to evade any responsibility or shield himself behind any supposititious or unguine doubt. He asks only what any scrupulous man must have demanded—"grounds more relative" than his two-months' old recollection of his impression of the spirit's sincerity.

Hamlet is never more normal than at the end of this long and carefully prepared soliloquy. But the natural reaction follows. He sleeps the next night well, and when he awakes on the morning before the play the fog has again settled over his brain—the thicker doubtless for its temporary dispersal. The relapse after artificial relief such as has been offered to him is wont to be serious, and the "To be or not to be" soliloquy shows him indeed in the blankest despair. The performance of the play rouses him, but insufficiently. A dozen distractions press upon him. The speech beginning " 'Tis now the very witching time of night" and still more that which commences "Now might I do it pat" show how uncertain of his

course he is, and he ends by venting irresponsibly on Polonius the energy which in the third soliloquy he meant to direct against Claudius. Oblivion and fatalistic indifference follow. Then, as if to enforce the point of the third soliloquy, Shakespeare shows in the seventh how like causes produce like results in Hamlet's mind, when the cheap melodrama of Fortinbras's expedition again unclouds his brain and effects another brief moment of clear vision.

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